



THE
FRENCH
ACADEMY

—
LEON H. VINCENT





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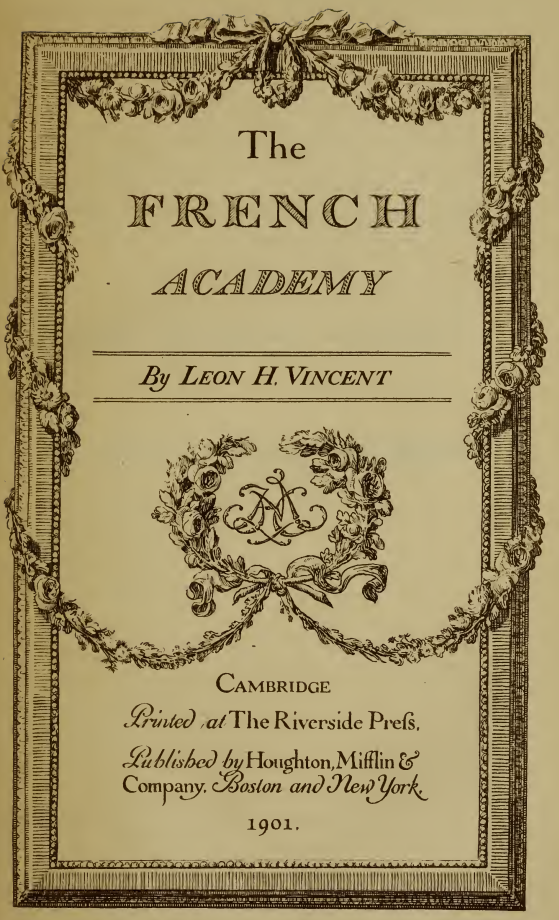
BRIEF STUDIES IN FRENCH SOCIETY
AND LETTERS IN THE XVII.
CENTURY

HÔTEL DE RAMBOUILLET AND THE
PRÉCIEUSES
THE FRENCH ACADEMY
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The
FRENCH
ACADEMY

By LEON H. VINCENT



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To

JESSIE THOMAS VINCENT

December 25, 1900



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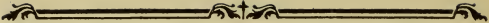
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THE FRENCH ACADEMY



THE French Academy owes its origin in large part to the influence of Hôtel de Rambouillet. Historians are almost unanimous on this point. Rœderer is positive and unqualified in his statement. He says: ‘From the conversation of Hôtel de Rambouillet, from the passion which was there awakened for thinking justly




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and speaking with precision, was born the Académie française.'


Other critics while leaning to the same view are less absolute and dogmatic. Livet maintains that the idea of an Academy was 'in the air like a germ,' and that the institution was bound to come into existence sooner or later. He refuses to admit the claim that this house or that house, this salon or the other, was, without shadow of doubt, the birthplace of the new society. On the other hand he is quite willing to grant that if the Academy was not born at Hôtel de Rambouillet 'it was, so to say, nursed and brought up there.'

Without further recourse to the vanity of figurative language we are to understand that the early Academi-



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cians were the more or less honored guests of the Marquise de Rambouillet; Godeau, Conrart, Chapelain, Gombauld, and Malleville were all members of that polished court which Fléchier described 'as numerous without being confused, modest without constraint, learned but not arrogant, cultivated yet without affectation.' The inference on the part of the historians of literature is that by virtue of a training received in the 'blue room' these men rose to the conception of what was later to become the Académie française. We shall presently see how a centrifugal force emanated from the 'blue room,' and how this force was responsible for those points which serve to differentiate the new literary society from the



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circle of Hôtel de Rambouillet. For the new organization was a society consisting only of men, a society holding informal meetings at which the talk was restricted to literature, a society where, so far as we can learn, there was a minimum of interest in the world of fashion or the world of politics.

Nisard says that the true academic spirit came into existence in that small and ill-furnished apartment where Malherbe held literary court. It was a shabby room which did not contain even a gentlemanly quota of chairs, and where the guests must often have 'economized room by standing up.' Here the 'legislator of Parnassus,' the 'tyrant of words and syllables,' laid down laws which have justly incensed



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all rhapsodical versifiers from his day to ours. The rhapsodical versifiers hate Malherbe because he said that no man has a right to make a fool of himself merely because he is a poet. Whatever Malherbe's verse did or did not contain, it was saturated with common sense. There are poets who maintain that common sense and poetry are incompatible, and who justify their theory by their practice. Malherbe would none of them or their works, and uttered all manner of sarcasms at their expense.

He taught his pupils that they had no right to let their whims control them. He reduced poetic license to its lowest terms. He showed that poetry must find its source deep in the general heart of men. He intro-



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duced the true academic spirit by making poetry subject to reason. There were great fundamental principles which all could approve. Why not acknowledge the authority of these principles? Malherbe introduced the academic spirit by the enunciation of a body of laws which poets of the highest rank could afford to obey. According to Nisard, the spirit which Malherbe brought into literature was precisely the spirit of discipline and selection which Henry IV applied to government and civil society. If we wish to be further convinced, with this historian, that the Academy sprang from Malherbe's circle, we may remember that here, as later in Conrart's house, the talk was chiefly of literature; no time was



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wasted in bows, compliments, and too solicitous inquiries after one another's health. The author of the *Stanzas to du Perier* knew when to be emphatic. The man who inquired at Malherbe's door for the President of Aurillac received from the poet's own lips the answer: 'I am the only President here.' The interruption had occurred no doubt just as Malherbe was telling his school of poets how poetry should be written.

Whether the Academy grew out of the meetings of Hôtel de Rambouillet or is to be regarded as a continuation, under new auspices, of the informal club which met with Malherbe, is a point not to be easily settled. Obscure as are the beginnings, there is a clear and well ordered history of the



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Academy from the year 1629, when it began to hold its meetings at the house of Conrart. There was no thought as yet of calling it an Academy. It had no name, no formal organization, no renown. It enjoyed an obscurity so blessed that the members used in after time to look back regretfully upon those years and describe them as the 'Golden Age.'


I

IN the year 1629 there lived in Paris, in a house situated in Rue des Vieilles-Étuves near Rue Saint Martin, a young man by the name of Valentin Conrart. He was Parisian by birth and bourgeois by extraction. Of Protestant blood, he remained a Protestant to the end of his days; this ‘without entailing upon himself the loss of a single friend,’ as a historian blandly observes. His greatest gift was for making friends and keeping

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them. He was neither rich nor poor, neither avaricious nor prodigal. He freely shared his worldly goods, and it was said of him that he derived more pleasure from a modest patrimony than other men from splendid fortunes.

Under Conrart's hospitable roof began the meetings of what afterwards became the Académie française. And if we ask why here rather than at Hôtel de Rambouillet where these gentlemen were frequently guests, the answer is in part this: —


In spite of the manifold attractions of Hôtel de Rambouillet, the winsome grace and cordial bearing of the hostess, the splendor and comfort of the mansion itself, the throng of guests among whom were to be counted all



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that Paris had to show of proud gentlemen, of noble and beautiful ladies, of poets, wits, and scholars, it remains true that some men of letters were not happy in this fashionable circle. There was too much glitter, pomp, and magnificence. If one is poor it is difficult to be completely at ease in the presence of wealth.


The beaux and gallants used to laugh at Chapelain's old-fashioned garments. Chapelain was guilty of wearing clothes which were the mode when Henry IV was king. This fine scholar was too completely absorbed in his books and literary projects to notice how much the cut of a coat changed from year to year. Moreover a deadly accusation was launched against him; it was darkly hinted that



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he wore a jacket made of one of his sister's old petticoats. Such a criticism is too sinister to be lived down. And Tallemant des Réaux made fun of Chapelain's boots. The poet must have known that he was an object of mirth for the irreverent at Hôtel de Rambouillet. We may doubt whether he cared very greatly. Chapelain was more than self-respecting. He was protected by a vanity than which there is no greater — the vanity of an erudite.

There were scholars more sensitive than he. Possibly they felt under restraint, or never quite at ease in the stately mansion. Two or three of these men had writhed under Malherbe's sarcasms in days not so remote when that 'pedagogue in spectacles'



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was in the fullness of his glory. They would remember that those were good days, however, and that the talk had been suggestive and free. They would long for the shabby old rooms where were neither curtains nor tapestries, but where a man was privileged to stretch his legs and speak his mind.

Malherbe was dead, but the spirit of free literary discussion survived. We can understand with how great pleasure the members of the old circle renewed, at Conrart's house, their talks on literature: how they enjoyed the comfort, unmixed with dismaying opulence, that surrounded them: and how, after the ancient and brutal manner of their kind, they reconciled themselves for a season to the absence



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of that sex which most disciplines when it most charms.

The meetings were held once a week, not at night, but in the afternoon. The streets of Paris were dangerous at any time, and especially so after dark. He was an adventurous soul who went abroad at a late hour without a bodyguard of servants armed with swords and staves.

At first there were but nine members, Conrart, Chapelain, Godeau, Gombauld, Giry, Habert, Abbé de Cérisy, Serizay, and Malleville.¹ The

¹ Valentin Conrart (1603–1675); poems, a preface to the posthumous works of Gombauld, and a version of the Psalms. He was an indefatigable collector of documents. The Conrart manuscripts in the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal at Paris comprise forty-two folio volumes.

Jean Chapelain (1595–1674); Preface to Ma-



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majority could rejoice in their youth;

rini's *Adonis*, odes, and *la Pucelle, ou la France délivrée*, of which twelve books appeared in 1656.

Antoine Godeau (1605-1672); poems, paraphrases of the Epistles, a Life of Saint Augustine, and a multitude of religious works.

Jean Ogier de Gombauld (1570-1666); author of a romance entitled *Endymion*, 1624. Wrote poems, letters, epigrams.

Louis Giry (1595-1665); numerous translations which were praised for the purity of the literary style.

Philippe Habert (1605-1637); poem, the *Temple of Death*.

Germain Habert, Abbé de Cérisy (1615-1655); poems and paraphrases of the Psalms.

Jacques de Serizay (1600?-1653); Intendant to the house of La Rochefoucauld, a poet who did not print.

Claude de Malleville (1597-1647); poems and epistles.



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one indeed, Cérisy, was a boy of fifteen, Habert and Godeau were but twenty-four, and Conrart their host was only twenty-six. Their sessions were no doubt characterized by a mixture of the intensely serious and the spontaneously effervescent, as is the habit of youth. Only two out of the nine were professed authors, but all had literary aspirations. They submitted their writings to the company, and were frank in making, and good-naturedly patient in receiving criticism. The conferences were followed sometimes by a collation, sometimes by the milder excitement of a 'promenade.'

The members of the little circle were united by many ties besides that of youth. All came of the same social



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grade, at least there were no striking differences; all were passionately devoted to the French language, zealous to improve it and to improve their own usage of it. Moreover we have reason to believe that their happy intercourse was marred by none of those horrid details with which the sons of men love to afflict themselves when they gather together, such as motions to be made and seconded, minutes to be read and endured, and resolutions to be passed. The conversation was the conversation of cultivated men, 'with nothing of the pedantic.' 'While the dominant themes were language and literature they talked of all sorts of things,' says Pellisson, 'of business, the news, belles-lettres.' They were assiduous and regular in meeting.




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Other than this there was no characteristic which was not informal and charming. The very talk was such as might spring up 'at an ordinary visit.' Pellisson assigns as the only reason for having a day and an hour the fact that Paris was a big city, where comrades lived at a distance each from the others; 'nothing was so inconvenient as to call and find that one's friend was not at home.'

The circle increased. Three members were added during the years of their meeting at Conrart's house, Faret, Desmarests de Saint-Sorlin, and finally Bois-Robert,¹ the factotum of Cardinal

¹ Nicholas Faret (1600-1646); poems, letters, and a famous manual of social usage entitled *l'Honnête-Homme*.

Jean Desmarests de Saint-Sorlin (1595-




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Richelieu. To Bois-Robert belongs the mingled praise and blame of having brought the young Academy from its quiet corner into that glare of publicity from which it was never to escape.

This Bois-Robert was a curious creature; first a country lawyer, afterwards an abbé and playwright, always a gambler, he had become in time chief among the favorites of Richelieu. At moments it is not easy to see wherein his function differed from that


1676); plays, an epic, *Clovis ou la France chrétienne*, and a romance, *Ariane*. His comedy, *les Visionnaires*, was pronounced inimitable by Pellisson.

Abbé de Bois-Robert (1592-1662); of his extant plays, eighteen in number, *la Belle Plaideuse* is said to be the only one worth preservation.



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of a paid spy. He was expected to keep his master informed of what was going on in various circles. His connections, political, literary, social, were wide; nevertheless there were places where he was not cordially received, — at Hôtel de Rambouillet, for example. His influence was very potent when the Academy was established under the authority of the King. The degree of potency is inexplicable save as we remember the relation between master and man. No one has ever denied Richelieu the gift of political shrewdness. The great minister knew when to tighten and when to relax the rein. He also knew when to speak and when to allow his deputies to speak for him. There was a craftiness in his dealings with the new



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Academy which could hardly have imposed on all the members. From time to time the Cardinal would address this body entreating it to honor him by doing thus and so; and the Academy was always ready with a profound obeisance in attestation of hearty willingness to do whatever the Cardinal wished. The minister had no desire to meddle with the Academy's every interest; it was enough that he controlled in what he believed to be vital. When he did express himself all was frank and open, though conducted with Seventeenth Century pomp and circumstance.


On the other hand it has been observed how often measures were decided upon, and new members enrolled, at the instance of Bois-Robert. This



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was the voice of the Cardinal speaking unofficially. At other times, and much of the time, we should have no reason to suppose, from the conduct of the Academicians, that an all-powerful minister lived. Indeed in the matter of the *Cid* they went their own pace, and while not openly opposing the Cardinal they did what was worse : they refused to make him happy in the way he wished.


Through Bois - Robert, then, the Cardinal learned of the literary discussions which were held from week to week at Conrart's house. He expressed himself as pleased with the idea. Pellisson phrases it thus : 'He [Richelieu] had a soul which instinctively rose to great ideas ; above all he loved the French language and wrote



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it himself with unusual skill.' He inquired of Bois-Robert 'whether these gentlemen would not become a body-corporate and hold their meetings under a public authority. He offered his protection and promised to establish their Company by letters-patent.'

Such was the message carried by Bois-Robert to that little circle which he had unwittingly, or as one critic declares, maliciously betrayed. They ought to have been pleased and they were not. To take them out of their small Eden was to rob them of what had been the great charm of that Eden, its freedom from responsibility, its independence of a critical and sometimes stupid public, its atmosphere of gayety tempered by a seri-




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ousness not too serious for human nature's daily environment.

The question was not settled without hot debate. Some were for refusing outright. Two of the gentlemen were allied with houses known to be openly hostile to Richelieu. Their objections were easily silenced, we may suppose, by the question, 'How refuse? Upon what ground? It is the Cardinal who does us this honor!'


Here lay the difficulty. The Cardinal's proposition that they throw aside their reserve and become a public body was less a suggestion than a command. 'There are gifts which one is not at liberty to refuse; everything depends upon the hand which offers the gift.' He whom Richelieu honored became at once conspicuous;



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he might not be comfortable in his splendor, but he was undeniably conspicuous. It is no exaggeration to say that there were members of the incipient Academy who would rather its meetings should cease altogether than continue under the jealous and watchful eye of the all-powerful minister.


To Chapelain belongs the credit of bringing the matter to a conclusion. He told his colleagues that they ought to be flattered by the honor done their society. He advised them that as matters stood they had no choice, they were not at liberty to elect the more agreeable and easier course. The man with whom they had to do desired imperiously whatever he desired at all; he was a man who would not



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well bear opposition. And finally, in a manner which may have been more shrewd than sound, Chapelain clinched the argument by reminding his friends that, under the laws of the realm, assemblies which met without the authority of the Prince were forbidden; it were better to yield to Richelieu than take the risk of having their society scattered.

Bois-Robert was accordingly instructed 'to thank the Cardinal most humbly for the honor he had done them,' and to say, with what seems to us polite insincerity, that 'they had never entertained so high a thought.' They were unquestionably honest in professing themselves 'surprised to learn of the project which his Eminence had in view,' and again they




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became merely polite in declaring the unanimity of their desire to follow Richelieu's wishes.

The Cardinal received their response with great satisfaction, and commanded Bois-Robert to say to them that they were to continue their meetings as usual, to increase their numbers, and to consult among themselves as to the form the new organization should take, and the laws by which it should be governed.

About this time Conrart, their host, announced that he was to be married, and added thereto, with a prescience hardly to be expected of a bachelor, that in the future his house would not be the most suitable place for the meetings of the Academy. Nevertheless he prayed them all as his very




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particular friends to assist at the celebration of the contract. Conrart married his cousin, Madeleine Muisson. The wedding took place, February 22, 1634.

The homeless Academy resumed its meetings at the house of Desmarests, and began seriously to consider the Cardinal's plan for its establishment as a public body. The Golden Age had come to an end.


II

PAUL PELLISSON, writing the history of the Académie française, reminds the friend to whom the book is addressed, of the description given by a certain poet of the founding of a new Republic; how some busied themselves in making the laws and appointing magistrates, others in parcelling out the land and tracing the plans of the houses; here they gathered together the materials for building, and there they laid the founda-



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tions of the walls and temples. ‘You may imagine,’ says Pellisson, ‘that it was a little like this at the inception of the Academy. Many things took place simultaneously which can only be described one by one.’ Among these many things three or four, at least, were of prime importance to the Academicians: they must augment their number, perfect their organization, elect officers, and choose a name.

The letters patent of Louis XIII provided that ‘our very dear and much beloved cousin, the Cardinal Duc de Richelieu’ should be known as the ‘chief and protector’ of the Academy. Richelieu held this dignity up to the time of his death in 1642. He was succeeded by the



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Chancellor Séguier, who was also an Academician. Séguier's protectorate came to an end in 1672. Louis XIV then accepted the honor. This established a precedent by virtue of which the head of the State was always the protector of the Academy.

To give 'order and form' to their meetings the Academicians determined to provide themselves at once with officers. There were to be three, a Director, a Chancellor, and a Secretary. The Director and Chancellor were chosen by lot, and held their positions each for a period of two months. The Secretary was chosen by ballot, and held his position for life; he was 'perpetual' secretary. The terms of the first named officers have been lengthened a little; the



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perpetual secretary still remains perpetual.

Their functions were as follows: The Director presided at the meetings. His duty was to keep order 'in the most civil and most exact manner possible, and as it ought to be done among equals.' When he asked for an expression of opinion from the Academy he followed the order in which the gentlemen were seated beginning with the member at his right. His own opinion was given after the other two officers had spoken.

The Chancellor was the guardian of the seal. He put the impress thereof upon all acts sanctioned by the Academy.

The Secretary kept the registers or minutes, was responsible for the

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papers, and in short had those duties to perform which secretaries have been wont to do from time immemorial.


The offices were filled as soon as they were constituted. Serizay became the first Director, and Desmarests the first Chancellor. Valentin Conrart, who was at that moment passing the honeymoon at the house of his brother-in-law a few leagues from Paris, was unanimously chosen Perpetual Secretary. Pellisson, writing in 1652, remarks on that singular caprice of fortune, whereby it happened that Chapelain, 'who is without doubt the most important member of the company,' had never held the office of Director or of Chancellor.

They deliberated long over the



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question of a name. Some were ambitious and proposed ‘Académie des beaux esprits;’ others ‘Académie de l’Eloquence;’ others still were of the opinion that ‘Académie Eminente’ would be a fitting title, referring the adjective not to themselves but to his Eminence, the Cardinal Duc, who was their protector. They finally decided upon the name by which they are still known, the *Académie française*. The name commended itself by its simplicity and unpretentiousness. To us moderns, who link that title with two hundred and sixty years of uninterrupted history and with a splendid bead-roll of literary fame, the phrase Académie française does not appear especially unostentatious. We must compare it with the



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fantastic and florid titles of its own day to realize that it was really plain and modest. Pellisson quotes a list of Italian academies, the *Intronati*, *della Crusca*, *Humoristi*, *Fantastici*, *Addormentati*, *Innominati*, and rejoices that his fellows had the good sense to call themselves by so homely a phrase as the French Academy.


For homely the phrase was, having neither the merit of splendor nor the attraction of novelty. Older academies had piqued themselves upon the selection of names which were 'mystifying, ambitious, or bizarre,' names, so Pellisson thought, which were better suited to a masquerade than to the needs of a literary body. In the simplicity of the expression, French Academy was a tribute to the



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common sense and judgment of the men who composed that society. They might have hit upon something more ‘gallant,’ as they used to say; they could hardly have found anything more practical.

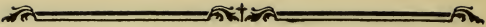
So long as the Academy was a private club its members were free from all but self-imposed obligations; they could work when they pleased and be idle when they pleased. But when the Academy became an Institution, with a Protector and ‘officers of sorts,’ it awakened to the fact that there was a public to whom it owed certain duties, and chief among them the duty of justifying its existence. The Public, always brutally utilitarian, says to a body of men like this: ‘What do you propose to do? Wherein is there



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advantage to us after you have done it?’

It would be difficult to imagine a company brought together for a more quixotic purpose. The Academy had an object which to the vulgar mind was as impudent as it was absurd, and as useless as it was impudent. These gentlemen frankly announced their intention of reforming the French language. The object was calculated to excite distrust and derision. The public is sensitive; it permits few liberties and is altogether intolerant of aspersions upon its parts of speech. There is no more effective way of affronting a man than by correcting his grammar or his pronunciation. Perhaps the abuse with which the Academy has been honored from time to




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time may be traced in large measure to the praiseworthy attitude of its first members on the important question of correct speech. The Academicians not only believed that the French language could be improved, but were rash enough to affirm that it lay within their power to improve it. They have shared the fate of other reformers: they were thought too radical in an earlier day, and they are abused for conservatism in this.


To understand what these gentlemen proposed to do we must read the letter or report addressed to the Cardinal on March 22, 1634, asking his protection. This letter contains a full statement of the ambitions and desires of the new Academy.

It begins with the flattery which



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the great of that time always expected and usually obtained. We must remember that Richelieu was not merely a patron of literature, he was suspected of actual authorship. He had his committee of poets, and when the divine art was the subject of conversation he spoke with authority and not as a statesman. His performance always fell short of his ambition. Men recognized the ambition, however, and honored it from one motive or another. At the beginning of the letter the Academicians say to Richelieu: 'If Monsieur the Cardinal had published his own writings nothing would have been lacking to the perfection of the language; he would have accomplished without doubt all that the Academy has proposed to itself to do. But that




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modesty of his which has kept his great works from seeing the light, has not prevented him from giving his approval should one wish to search these same hidden treasures, or from authorizing the search.'

The flattery is gross, but not grosser than the time demanded. Nor is it characteristically French, as we might feel inclined to believe. The English dedicatory epistles of this period are positively nauseating. Striplings of noble birth were told that their school-boy verses ranked with the poetry of Vergil, and were not unlikely to dim the splendor of Homer's reputation.

'The country which we inhabit,' continues the letter of the Academicians, 'has always produced valiant men; but their valor has gone unre-



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cognized in comparison with that of the Greeks and Romans because they have not known the art of making it illustrious by their writings. To-day the Greeks and the Romans are the slaves of other nations, and the tongues which they spoke are accounted among the things that are dead. It is a happy moment for France, since we not only rest in possession of the valor of our ancestors, but are also in a position to bring back to life the art of Eloquence, which seemed to have been buried with those who were the inventors and the masters of it.' After a glance toward the King, so fortunate in his 'great and memorable deeds,' and with another compliment to the Cardinal, 'not the least of whose thoughts was this of taking literature under his



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protection and making it flourish by his approbation and favor,' the letter goes on to state the object of the Academy and the method by which that object is to be attained.


‘He [the Cardinal] feels that nothing is lacking to the felicity of this Realm but to separate from the crowd of barbarous tongues this language which we speak, and which all our neighbors will soon be speaking, if our conquests continue as they have begun. For this happy purpose he has assembled a certain number of persons capable of seconding his intentions. Their conferences will be one of the best methods of bringing his plans to pass. Our language is already the most perfect of living languages, and would succeed to the place



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of the Latin as that succeeded to the Greek, if we took more care than hitherto with the art of expression, which is not indeed all of eloquence, but a considerable and important part of it.'

For the performance of the task to which the Academicians had set themselves peculiar qualities were necessary. 'It was not sufficient,' they thought, 'to have a profound knowledge of the sciences, nor yet the power to converse agreeably, nor a quick and lively imagination capable of great invention; there was need of a special genius, a peculiar insight, capable of determining what was finest and most subtle in eloquence. There was need, in short, of something compounded of all these other qualities,



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established in an even temperament, subject to reason, and controlled by a firm judgment.'

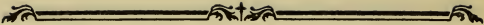
In thus describing the needs of the ideal Academician these gentlemen were consciously or unconsciously making a 'composite' portrait of themselves. If they painted themselves in fair colors, it was no more than they deserved. The early Academicians had a genius for language. They were not of high birth or high position. 'The founders of the Academy were neither lords nor prelates. Few of them could be called professional writers. They were of the middle class, or else gentlemen of minor social position. Their characters were diverse, but there was a unifying bond, love for the French lan-



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guage, and a passionate desire to bring that language to the highest perfection of which it was capable.’¹ They were not men of genius, which may be accounted a blessing, since geniuses rarely pull together. With few exceptions they were not learned men. ‘They were guided by the most perfect tact and by a constant mingling with the best society.’ We may wonder at the coincidence which brought together so many men who had not alone a taste for correct speech, but whose privilege it was to mingle with the best society. We must wonder even more that there was a time in the history of civilization when the ‘best

¹ Petit de Julleville : *Histoire de la Langue et de la Littérature française*, vol. iv. p. 139.




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society' furnished the standard of correct speech.

The Academicians proposed to attain their object in part thus: They would undertake to 'cleanse' the language of its impurities. The language was vitiated 'in the lips of the common people, in the crowded courts of Justice and the jargon of law, or by the bad usage of ignorant courtiers, or by the carelessness of those who corrupt language in the act of writing it, or by men who utter from the pulpit what ought indeed to be said but in a manner in which it ought not to be said.'

The compilers of this letter believed that it was necessary to use words according to a fixed method. There must be a hierarchy of words. It was



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not so much a question of rooting out bad parts of speech as of keeping the various parts of speech in their place; the lower were continually aspiring to a rank among the higher. The Academicians recognized three classes of literary composition, the noble or sublime, the middle class, and the low, or comic. It followed logically that words which were out of place in writings of the highest sort might be tolerated in literature of the middle class, and welcomed in the low class. The Academicians did not propose to content themselves with mere theory. 'One of the methods by which they hoped to reach perfection was by examining and correcting their own works. They proposed to judge with severity the subject, the manner in



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which it had been treated, the arguments, the style, the rhythm, and then each word in particular.'

I have paraphrased with less skill than I could have wished the sentences of that famous report, sentences which should be read in Pellisson if one wishes fully to appreciate their charm. The members took infinite pains with the document. It was examined first by a committee of two, and then by a committee of four. So zealous were they to perfect the literary expression that they printed thirty copies and distributed them among the members with instructions to submit the language to close scrutiny. They held extraordinary sessions to pass upon the individual criticisms, after which Faret put the report into its final form.




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The document was then presented to the Cardinal by the hands of Faret and Bois-Robert.


In spite of this care the Cardinal was pleased to make some improvements on his own account. They accepted his suggestions in part, and with surprising independence refused to sanction all. This fact was regarded by the historian of the Academy as a display of unusual and praiseworthy courage. In those days, to contradict His Eminence was little less than a crime.

Having the approval of the Cardinal, nothing was wanting but the authority of the King and the sanction of Parliament. The former was implied in the wish of the minister, and Louis, 'by the grace of God King of



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France and of Navarre,' authorized the existence of the new company. The Parliament was intractable, avowedly suspicious. Threats and prayers were hardly sufficient to bring it to terms. To point out the innocent and laudable object for which the Academy had been formed availed nothing; this very innocence was one of the suspicious things about it. That the despotic and wily Cardinal should have no other purpose than that which lay upon the surface was inconceivable. Not until July, 1637, a year and a half after the date of the Academy's creation, did Parliament 'verify the edict.' The terms of legal sanction restricted the new body to the consideration of matters relating to language and literature. No loophole was left



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for some ulterior political object which Richelieu might be supposed to have in view.

In a 'brief study' like this we are not required to trace the numerical growth of the Academy until it attained to legal size. There would seem to be difficulty enough in the selection of new members at the present time; the difficulty was much greater in the Seventeenth Century. It is surprising to note how long a period elapsed after the Academicians were empowered to increase their number to forty before they fully availed themselves of that privilege. There were only nine in the little group of friends who met at Conrart's house. They augmented their circle until it comprised twenty-six individ-

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uals. It seemed impossible, however, to bridge the chasm between twenty-six and forty. Candidates presented themselves, but it might almost be said of them as the witty Jane Austen said of her dancing partners: 'There were not many men present, and such as there were were not good for much.' And when, after surmounting various obstacles, the Academy was within one of the total of forty, Philippe Habert and Méziriac died, and their vacant places had to be filled. 'Five laborious years,' from March 13, 1634, to February 14, 1639, were required to complete the list according to the statutory provision.¹


¹ The following list of the first Academicians is taken from the Abbé Fabre's *Chapelain et nos*



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Not a few names in the list of the first Academicians mean little or nothing to the modern reader. The student of literature encounters them as he turns the pages of his books. The works of a half dozen survive and are occasionally read, and the others are known only because they


deux premières Académies. The scholars differ somewhat as to the order in which these names should be arranged. — Godeau, Gombauld, Chapelain, Philippe Habert, Germain Habert (Abbé de Cérisy), Conrart, Serizay, Malleville, Faret, Desmarests, Bois-Robert, Bautru, Silhon, Sirmond, Bourzeys, Méziriac, Maynard, Colletet, Gomberville, Saint-Amant, Colomby, Baudoin, L'Estoile, Porchères d'Arbaud, Hay du Chastelet, Servien, Balzac, Racan, Bardin, Bois-sat, Vaugelas, Voiture, Porchères-Laugier, Habert de Montmort, La Chambre, Séguier, Daniel Hay (Abbé de Chambon), Granier, Giry, Priézac.



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had a contemporary fame and were so fortunate as to become members of a unique society. Who were these men, whose claim to literary glory is based on another one of those everlasting versions of the Psalms? Paraphrasing the Psalms appears to have been one of the tasks both poets and poetasters were bound to set themselves in the early Seventeenth Century; just as at the present day men must be watched lest on insufficient provocation they fall to making versions of the Rubáiyát.

Two questions not easily answered and therefore often discussed are these: first, How much credit is due Richelieu in the establishing of the Academy? and second, How disinterested were his motives in bringing



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it from a private and unknown, into a public and official, existence ?


As the matter stands, he has had all the glory from it that an ambitious Prime Minister could ask. He was the first Protector. His image and superscription are upon the Academy's seal. There is not a text-book, in a world already burdened with text-books, which does not give Richelieu the credit off-hand of founding the Académie française. This is undoubtedly going too far. But it is another illustration of what happens too often in the final historical readjustment ; the wrong man gets all the honor and the real inventor has nothing. Richelieu did not found the Academy ; it was in existence, and he merely laid hands upon it and manipulated it to



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the glory of France and of Richelieu. That the organization was wholly admirable in its first state is shown by the avidity with which he seized upon it and placed it under his immediate care. He could not have foreseen what it would become under Chapelain's direction and influence.

His motives, like the motives of other politicians, were probably mixed. There seems to be no question as to the sincerity of his interest in literature. He had an abnormal passion for the drama. He freely pensioned men of letters, and the pensions were sometimes paid. Every great man had some poet allied with him, and Richelieu like the rest; but more splendid than other men, he had five poets. The theory that the Cardinal



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feared some influence emanating from the Conrart circle — an influence which he must control at once lest it become a literary Hercules — has been laughed at as absurd and groundless. It was a part of this man's theory to control, to repress where repression seemed necessary, to foster, to encourage, to animate, when this method would best attain his end.

That the hand of the master might prove heavy there was reason to fear, if only because of the Cardinal's attitude during the 'quarrel of the *Cid*.' The details of this affair belong to the history of Corneille's dramatic career; but we must at least outline the story, remembering that the Academy was not an aggressor, and that it was most unwillingly a participant in the dispute.

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In 1636, toward the close of the year, Corneille produced the *Cid*. It had a triumph that was most gratifying to its author and most heartbreaking to other dramatic poets. Why Richelieu should have been prejudiced against the piece is not known. The *Cid* was a Spanish subject, France was at war with Spain, and it may have been, as Professor Dowden suggests, that Corneille praised Spain at the wrong time.

Georges de Scudéry attacked the play partly from jealousy, partly because he thought to please the Cardinal, and partly because Corneille had been human enough to plume himself upon his success. A war of pamphlets ensued in which other disappointed playwrights took part. The



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burden of Scudéry's complaint was that the *Cid* was not original but a translation, that the characters were not true to life, that it violated the rules, and that the poetry was bad. Scudéry was not able to hold his own in the discussion, and after talking of 'swords' and 'honor,' being a sort of 'miles gloriosus,' he appealed to the Academy to judge between himself and Corneille. The Academy urged its youth and inexperience as well as the most important fact that Corneille had not asked for an expression of opinion. The Cardinal instructed Bois-Robert to secure Corneille's consent. After some hesitation Corneille yielded. He feared that the Cardinal might stop his pension. The principal sentence in Corneille's letter has



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often been quoted for its humor. It may be translated thus. Corneille says, replying to Bois-Robert: 'Since you write me that Monseigneur will be happy to see the Academy's opinion of the *Cid*, and that it will divert His Eminence, I have nothing to say.' People submitted to much in those days if they thought it would 'divert' His Eminence.

The Academy made no unseemly haste; five months were spent in formulating an opinion. The task was disagreeable, and particularly so to Chapelain, upon whom the burden of it fell. It was necessary to be just to the poet, and it was important that the Cardinal be satisfied. *The Sentiments of the French Academy on the Cid* appeared toward the close of 1637.




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Few pieces of critical writing have provoked in turn such a variety of criticisms. La Bruyère said: 'One of the best critiques that have been made on any subject is that on the *Cid*.' I turn to the book of an eminent modern scholar, Lanson, and read that the *Sentiments* is a 'narrow and cavilling piece of criticism, without broad views or elevation of spirit.' Thus do the doctors agree.

Corneille became a member of the Academy in 1646. This was a club which suffered writers of plays and dramatic critics to sit at the same table. Proofs are not wanting that the relations between the poet and his former judge were friendly and even affectionate.

III

IN the early annals of the Academy no figure stands out with such prominence as that of Jean Chapelain, the true type of Seventeenth Century Academician. He was learned, ceremonious, fond of the amenities both social and literary, a respecter of laws and customs, sufficiently independent to be esteemed a man of character, passionately devoted to the French language, and unceasing, as well as untiring, in his efforts to make the new




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society a power in the land. There was nothing enigmatical in his nature, the virtues and the defects were quite patent; but it has been left for a Nineteenth Century critic to discover what his contemporaries never suspected, and what all writers up to this time, if they knew it, have not seen fit to mention, namely, that Chapelain was modest.

What a critical innovation this is can only be understood by reading the comments on Chapelain from Boileau's day to ours.


The head and front of Chapelain's offending seem to lie not so much in the fact that he thought he had a Muse and sometimes spoke of himself as a poet, as in the more culpable fact that he actually printed a long



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and tedious poem. The fault is one of which many men have been guilty. If a man has not the courage of his poetry, he is a weak man indeed. Chapelain's poem, the *Pucelle*, had some vogue in its own day and has had none since. No one speaks of it in terms other than those of contempt. Voltaire's comment is well known: 'Without the *Pucelle* Chapelain would have had some reputation among men of letters.' Had Voltaire read the poem, we wonder! It is quite possible. When, however, the critics take this uniform attitude through two centuries, the public is not encouraged; and the number of those who do not read Chapelain's epic is constantly increasing.

Perhaps Chapelain's mother is to be



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held partly responsible for her son's error of judgment in thinking of himself as a poet. This ambitious woman when a little girl had known Ronsard ; she was a daughter of Ronsard's intimate friend, Michel Corbière. Her imagination was kindled with the thought of the honors which that famous poet had enjoyed. She passionately desired that her son should enter the lists and contend for similar rewards. 'From the moment when first she noted in him some happy disposition toward study, she consecrated him to poetry.'

Poet or not, young Chapelain became at all events a scholar. He was one of the learned men of his time, and he had the French gift of know-



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ing how to carry his learning with incomparable ease.


Chapelain's mother was dazzled with the sight of Ronsard's earthly glory, and it was the son's privilege to behold the splendor which irradiated the form of the cavalier Marini when that eminent poet visited France in 1615. Chapelain was twenty, an age at which one must be enthusiastic; he is to be pardoned if he found that the rewards of poetry were great. We do not pay such homage to poets nowadays; it would turn their heads. We build triumphal arches, it is true, but we build them that we may celebrate the deeds of men of action, of soldiers and sailors. A passion for the glory of war was rife then, but in addition men were glad to pay hom-



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age to poetry, or what they believed to be such. The Italian Marini had a contemporaneous reputation as great as Shakespeare has to-day. He had written verse in almost every known form, and had himself invented new forms. 'He was more popular than Ariosto and more enjoyed than Tasso.' He was fêted and caressed alike by princes, lords, great ladies, and men of letters. He was the only poet of his time who had so much money that he could part with some of it for the benefit of his friends.

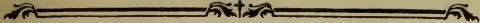
Chapelain wrote the preface of Marini's *Adonis*, a poem which was received as never poem in the history of the world had been received. It was published in 1623, the very year in which appeared the ill-printed, ill-



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edited, but now glorious First Folio edition of Shakespeare's Plays. These facts of Marini's career upset one's faith in the value of contemporary applause. When Marini left France, 'he received on the road honors which are only accorded princes; he saw his statue erected in the towns through which he passed, and the noblest of the inhabitants disputing for the distinction of being his host.'

Chapelain was thirty-four when he began to attend the meetings at Conrart's house, and about forty years of age when the Académie française was founded. He became absorbed in its work from that moment, and never allowed his interest to wane in the slightest degree up to the day of his death, February 22, 1674. If one



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man more than another deserved to be called the 'soul of the Academy,' Chapelain was he. His smiling patience, his readiness with the happy compliment and the soothing word, that address and suppleness which are the product of years of experience and of close intimacy with a social world which insists upon the graces and amenities, all these things came into play.

He was the chief editor of the Statutes of 1635. The Academicians had been asked to submit memoirs on the subject. The memoirs were then put into the hands of a committee of four. Chapelain was a member of this committee. His hand has been traced in those Statutes which determined the work of the Academy. For example,



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Section XXIV says: ‘The principal function of the Academy shall be to work with all the care and all the diligence possible to give definite rules to our language, and to render it pure, eloquent, and capable of treating the arts and sciences.’

That the means for purifying the language and making it capable of the highest eloquence might be brought within reach of all, Chapelain had advised the compilation of an ample Dictionary, an exact Grammar containing a section on the ornaments of language, a Rhetoric, and a Poetic. These last named books would supply a body of rules for whoever wished to write in prose or in verse. In Section XXVI of the Statutes the Academy pledges itself to make these books.

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Only the Dictionary was compiled; two hundred and sixty years have not sufficed to bring into existence the Grammar, the Rhetoric, or the treatise on Poetry.


In this labor of regulating the Statutes for the new body, and in work equally thankless, Chapelain was indefatigable. The Abbé Fabre in his book, *Chapelain et nos deux premières Académies*, a book to which all students of this period are unspeakably indebted, says: 'More than any one of his companions Chapelain represents in perfection the academic genius. This spirit did not grow up in him little by little with the years; from the first day it was matured and completely developed. In the absence of every tradition, without precedent, without guide,



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without counsel, he realized the type of the Academician as he ought to be and would be later. The zeal for language, the independence of character, an ardent love for the Academy, a somewhat jealous care for its dignity, a right respect for the rules, and an exemplary assiduity at its meetings, all of these things found expression in his single self.


‘From the first existence of the Academy, Chapelain was a vigilant guardian of the honor of the Company and of the integrity of its members. He interpreted the constitution, he gave his decisions with the gravity of a Roman lawyer. He invoked the Statutes, the established usages, as of an ancient body with traditions which carried weight and must be respected.’



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Nothing exhibits Chapelain in clearer light as the defender of ancient customs than the incident of the printer Camusat. It was written in the law that the Academy's bookseller, like the Secretary, should be perpetual. When Camusat died, Chapelain maintained that by their law the position belonged to the widow. Richelieu wished to give the place to Cra-moisy. Chapelain held out for the interests of the widow and children of their former printer, and strange to say won his point.


The Academy holds to one curious and ancient custom of which we should take note; it requires candidates for admission to ask for the honor. It is not enough that a man be eligible, he must say that he believes himself to



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be eligible, not in those terms, but by calling upon the members individually and asking their suffrages. This has led in the course of years to a number of surprising and piquant situations, as when a man finds himself obliged to ask his enemy in the enemy's own house for the privilege of closer intimacy with him.


The custom dates from the time when Arnauld d'Andilly, brother of the great Arnauld, refused to accept a seat in the new Academy. The members were naturally affronted. The highest gift in their power to bestow had been spurned. They wisely decided that in the future whoever coveted the honor of an election must ask for it, the final decision being left to them. It assured absolute pro-



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tection. No candidate would be likely to subject himself to the almost humiliating process of asking thirty-nine times for the individual votes of as many members, only to refuse in case he was elected. The rigor of the custom has not diminished with the years. ‘Whether he be an illustrious writer or an obscure, it makes no difference, the candidate is obliged to pay the visits, to go from door to door, from the member who lives at Versailles to the member who lives at Brunoy. To be admitted to the Académie française is not an easy thing. Works of high merit do not suffice; it is necessary among other virtues to add a strong dose of patience and of courage.’

The custom is one which lends



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itself to satirical purposes. A lively caricature appeared in the illustrated papers, three or four years since, apropos of the candidacy of a certain robust and prolific novelist. He stands in listening attitude before a closed door which is inscribed *Académie française*. Strapped on his back is a vast pile of books, the fruit of his resistless and sometimes brutal energy. The imperative quality of his petition for admittance is evident; he has pulled the bell-cord with such violence as to break it in two. The caricaturist, to show how little he sympathizes with either side, has drawn upon the closed door a symbol which would seem to indicate that he had been trying to read the history of the Academy in the *Encomium Moriae*,



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rather than where he should have read it, in the fascinating pages of Pellisson's narrative.


Other customs have sprung up and crystallized into permanency, such as that of making a formal and elaborate speech giving expression to one's gratitude for the honor of being elected one of the Forty. In early days it would have seemed to be enough if one said, quite unostentatiously, that he realized the merits of the society to which he had been admitted. When, however, Patru the great forensic orator became a member, he made his acknowledgment in so finished a manner, with such grace of utterance and splendor of phrase, as to charm all who heard him. They determined that in the future they would



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give themselves the pleasure of listening to a formal discourse from each new Academician. For in those simple-minded days men thought it a virtue to speak well. They themselves talked with precision, clarity, and elegance, and they had a pleasure in hearing the talk of men who held the same ideals.

Patru's eloquent address had been sufficient to establish precedent in favor of a formal rather than an informal expression of thanks; another remarkable speech led to the custom of opening the doors of the Academy to the public on the day when a new member was received. In 1671, Charles Perrault was admitted. One hardly need to explain that Charles Perrault was the author of the *Tales*



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of *Mother Goose*, and there are critics who would have us believe, and with reason, that not to know *Mother Goose* is to lack the first elements of a liberal education. Perrault, seeing that the company gave signs of genuine satisfaction with his ‘harangue,’ and having reason to believe that their praises were sincere, said to them that if his discourse had given them pleasure, it would give pleasure to everybody. ‘It seemed to me that it would not be ill done if the Academy opened its doors to the public on the days when new members were received. In allowing these ceremonies to be witnessed the Academy was showing itself in its best attire; as on like principle it was well that the doors were closed when the Academy



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worked at its Dictionary, because the public was not capable of understanding the beauties of that work, a work not to be accomplished without disputes, and sometimes not without vehemence.'

His opinion prevailed, and since that time the receptions have been public. Nothing is more eagerly sought for to this day by the outside world than the privilege of being present when a new member is admitted. The chance of obtaining an election is so slender, the honor is so high, that men may be depended upon to recognize the importance of the day and to speak with such measure of eloquence as Heaven has given them.

If the Academy has its customs, so too has the public, and chief among


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them the ancient and dishonorable custom of scoffing. From the first the Academy had enemies. This was in the nature of things. If a man of marked personality arouses antagonism, an institution of marked character will be equally fortunate. Some people hate a society merely because they do not belong to it. Elect them to membership and their hostility ceases; the grounds of it have been removed. The letters patent given by Louis XIII for the establishment of the Académie française provided that the membership of that body should be restricted to forty. All the amateurs of literature not included in the forty were in a manner forced into a party of opposition. They took the attitude with varying degrees of intensity



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or indifference. Men interested in politics saw proof that some iniquity was toward in the fact that Richelieu was the originator and protector of the new enterprise. The common people of that time were as the common people are everywhere and at all times, a compound of good sense and folly. Pellisson relates the incident of the merchant of Paris who had bargained for a house in Rue des Cinq-Diamants, the street in which Chapelain lived. He observed that on certain days there was an unusual influx of carriages and inquired the cause. Being told that the Academy met there, the good merchant instantly broke the bargain; he did not wish to live in a street where was held 'a Cademie de Manopoleurs.'



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Sometimes the enemies of the Academy were of its own household. Balzac the Magnificent is a case in point. Balzac had little of the gregarious or the accommodating in his nature. He was happy on his literary throne; he comprehended the nature of incense — he was not happy as a man among equals. He was enrolled among the Academicians ‘almost by force,’ lived too far from Paris to attend the meetings, and had always a caustic word for members and measures alike. When he died, he left a sum of money to be used for a prize of eloquence to be called by his name. Critics said that only in this way could he sustain for a little longer his falling reputation.

Among the lampoons showered



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upon the Academy at the time of its inception and during its early life, three are worthy of note. The first is the *Comédie des Académistes*, the reputed work of 'a Norman gentleman by the name of Saint-Evremond,' who was very careful not to acknowledge the authorship, 'fearing the indignation of the Cardinal.' The comedy is one of those pieces which depend for effect on local allusions; they presuppose a perfect knowledge on the part of the reader or hearer of all the scenes, incidents, and characters. Their flavor is usually evanescent. The *Comédie* of Saint-Evremond has a value as a document. Moreover it was the work of a man who could not write ill.

The second lampoon of which Pel-

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lisson gives an account is entitled: *Rôle des présentations faites aux grands jours de l'Eloquence françoise*. 'It is a register of some ridiculous requests for the preservation or the suppression of certain words, together with the pretended replies of the Academy.' The author was Charles Sorel, who afterward wrote *Francion*, and the *Berger extravagant*.

The most effective of the early satires upon the Academy was called the *Requête des Dictionnaires*. It is a piece of clever verse by a really clever man, Ménage, who ought to have been of the Academy and was not. He urged upon the dictionary makers the necessity and the wisdom of haste lest the final part of their book bear no relation to the first part. Ménage




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was prophetic without intending to be; and the enormous and painful work of revision which was entailed later upon the Academy was due largely to the fact that in the years that had elapsed since the first letters of the alphabet were compiled the language had changed. Ménage laughs at those pretensions which were made *for* the society rather than by its members, and which asserted that the language would now be fixed, no longer fluctuating and unstable. ‘After all,’ says the satirist, ‘it is Monsieur Usage who makes and unmakes language.’

*‘C’est après tout Monsieur l’Usage
Qui fait ou défait le langage,’*


and the operations of this all-important personage are likely to render the



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Academy's labor of little effect. A time came when Ménage was a natural candidate for the honors of the Academy and began a little to regret having written his lively piece. It was not sufficient of itself to keep him out, but it was occasionally brought up against him. Pellisson, with his invariable courtesy, says of Ménage: 'He was a close and particular friend, as he is to-day, of several of the Academicians of whom he has spoken in this *Requête*, and he did not undertake it, as he has protested, through motives of hate or envy, but merely to divert himself.'

These three satires were but the beginning. A library might easily be made wholly of lampoons on the Académie française. The satirical



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genius of the French people is mordant and copious. It is a goodly stretch of years from the *Requête des Dictionnaires* to Daudet's cynical *Immortel*, and the lampoonists have not wasted a minute of their time or let slip a single opportunity. We, in America, are so far removed from the scene of conflict that we cannot understand the petty hostility to a body whose traditions are so noble, and in whose good repute one would suppose every French man of letters might have a personal pride, no matter how remote the chance of his own election to a *fauteuil*, or how presumptuous even the entertainment of such a thought. It is sometimes hinted that Americans are making themselves ridiculous with their mod-



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ern passion for hereditary societies and honors. This is quite possible. We can the better sympathize then with the Abbé Fabre when he laments certain tendencies in his own country. Speaking of the modern attacks upon the Academy he says: 'Little by little we are becoming ridiculous with our passion for democracy. We have done with the aristocracy of birth, we shall not be sorry to have done with the aristocracy of intellect.'

I am glad that the Abbé Fabre had this moment of depression, since it led him to write several instructive and most amusing volumes throwing all manner of direct and side lights upon the history of the *société précieuse*, and especially upon the history of the Academy, 'an institution which has




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resisted all attacks, which has remained superior to all our political vicissitudes, and which, after so many trials victoriously surmounted, seems likely to endure as long as the French nation.'

This attitude of loyalty towards the traditional is quite old-fashioned, altogether lacking the rampant iconoclasm of men who imagine that to be destructive is to be both modern and clever. It is nevertheless much more agreeable than the attitude of Daudet, and infinitely to be preferred to the morbid egoism of Goncourt, who must needs endow his antagonism to the Académie française by founding an Academy to be called by his own name.


IV


WHEN once the difficult business of the *Cid* was disposed of, the Academy was able to turn its energies to a task equally legitimate, and doubtless more agreeable than that of picking flaws in the work of a popular and gifted dramatist, to wit, the compilation of the Dictionary. Chapelain and Vaugelas are the names oftenest mentioned in connection with this great undertaking. And we may not allow ourselves to forget how close



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the subject lay to Richelieu's heart. 'He believed,' says Petit de Julleville, 'that the Dictionary would aid marvellously in fixing the language.' Petit de Julleville adds that such a hope were well enough justified if one but kept in mind the fact that such a thing as absolute unity does not exist in any language. 'The idea of the perpetual fixing of a living idiom is only a chimera. Languages are fixed when they are dead.'


The obligation to make a dictionary was imposed upon the Academy by its statutes. Almost from the moment of their establishment as a public body Chapelain had outlined for the approval of his friends a plan for a dictionary; he now presented this plan for the second time. 'Since



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the object of the Academy,' so run the words of Chapelain's manifesto, 'is to render the language capable of the highest eloquence, it is necessary to draw up two ample treatises, one on rhetoric and the other on the art of poetry. But to follow the natural order these treatises ought to be preceded by a grammar, . . . and above all, by a dictionary, which would be, as it were, the treasure-house and magazine of simple terms and accepted phrases.'


'To carry out this design of the dictionary it will be necessary to make a choice of all the dead authors who have written the purest French, and distribute them among all the Academicians to the end that each may read attentively the authors who have



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fallen to his lot, and enter in alphabetical order on different leaves, the phrases and locutions which he believes to be French. . . . These leaves are to be submitted to the company who will pass judgment upon them. In a short time they will have collected a whole body of the language, and will insert in the dictionary the passages from these authors, recognizing the authors for original in those things quoted from them, without, nevertheless, admitting them as such in other respects, the which they tacitly disapprove, if the dictionary does not contain them.'

As to phrases and words of the day which were not always to be found in 'good' authors, the Academy was to



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‘mark them with some note to show that they were authorized by usage.’

The arrangement of the dictionary proposed by Chapelain was unusual, and experience has shown it to be unpractical. There were to be two divisions of the book. The first division would contain, in alphabetical order, a collection of all those simple words (nouns, verbs, or other words) which merit the name of *roots*, and which have produced compounds, derivatives, diminutives, and which are also the basis of certain phrases. Each simple word was to be marked to show what part of speech it was called, and then be immediately followed by the compounds, derivatives, diminutives, and phrases, with their respective authorities. If, for example, one wanted

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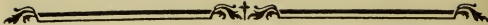
to find the word *engluer*, he would turn to the letter G and look under the word *glu*. The plan is identical with that used by Henri Estienne in compiling his Greek thesaurus. Chapelain believed that it would be unnecessary to cite authorities for the simple words; such words were known to everybody, and their integrity was unquestioned. There would be the usual marks to indicate the gender of words. Very singular to our modern ideas was the provision which was to be made to show whether a word was poetical or otherwise, and whether its proper place was in a composition of the sublime class, the middle, or the low class. As to the vexed question of how words should be spelled, Chapelain was conservative without being



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hidebound. His theory was: Hold to the accepted orthography in order not to confuse the plain reader, but cut away superfluities when it can be done without serious consequence.

In this way the body of the Dictionary was to be constructed; it would be followed by a second part, in which all the words, simple or otherwise, were to be placed in strict alphabetical order — ‘en confusion,’ says Chapelain — with a single reference to the page of the ‘grand’ Dictionary, where each word would be found. To facilitate the reading of old books, all obsolete words and phrases were to be indicated and defined. And lastly, for the convenience of foreigners, the Academicians might, if they saw fit, add a Latin dictionary



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of radical words, each marked with a reference to its French equivalent in the 'grand' Dictionary. To avoid making the book too big—a scruple which never disturbs the American compiler of dictionaries—Chapelain proposed to omit all proper names of seas, mountains, rivers, and towns. Words peculiar to arts and professions might well be omitted, he thought, to find a place later in special dictionaries, where they who had need of technical information could seek them. This in brief was Chapelain's plan, approved by the Academy, and destined none the less to suffer numerous modifications when the work of compilation actually began.

One may find considerable amusement in comparing the names of




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authors who, in 1634, were celebrated enough to become 'authorities' in a dictionary, with the names most often met with to-day. Turn the pages of a standard work such as Littré, glance down a few columns, and select quite at random the names which strike the eye. One finds La Fontaine, Fénelon, Voltaire, Boileau, Corneille, Massillon, La Bruyère, Molière, Madame de Sévigné, Diderot, Racine, Fléchier, Malherbe, Bourdaloue, and Bossuet, only one of whom was available in 1634. Voltaire and Diderot belong to the next century, to be sure; but of the Seventeenth Century authors, who besides Malherbe was able to be quoted? La Fontaine is a name one encounters on almost every page of Littré; indeed the compilers of French diction-

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aries are not able to do without him. Equally necessary though less often quoted, perhaps, are Molière, Madame de Sévigné, and Boileau. But in 1634 Molière and La Fontaine were respectively twelve and thirteen years of age, little Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, the future Madame de Sévigné, was a child of eight, and Boileau was hardly out of the cradle. Corneille, who justifies so many words in the modern lexicon, was in 1634 on the eve of producing the *Cid*; while *Horace*, *Cinna*, and *Polyeucte* were in embryo. Fléchier was of the same age with Boileau. Racine was not yet born, neither was Massillon; and Bossuet was in the first of the seven ages of man.

All of this is obvious but interesting,



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if only as an illustration of the truth of Nisard's remark that in Spain and Italy the invention of Academies followed upon the decline of the great literature; but that the Académie française preceded the burst of splendor which has been attributed with excess of generosity to the influence of Louis XIV.

The mightiest names, then, in French letters were yet to be when Chapelain in 1634 first drew up his prospectus for a dictionary. And even the contemporaries, superb as were their reputations, could not be quoted, since the only author good for a dictionary was a dead author. This, by the way, is a sound working theory; when a man is dead, and has been dead for a long time, we may per-

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chance know whether his works will live after him.

Four years of the Academy's existence as an official body had passed, and the members were taking up the business of the Dictionary in earnest; but the situation was practically unchanged. It was not possible to quote Corneille in 1638 any more than it would have been possible to quote him in 1634. He had made a stir in the world with his much discussed play, but he had not yet achieved the distinction of being both famous and dead.

The men whom they proposed to cite as authorities in prose were Amyot, Montaigne, Du Vair, Desportes, Charon, Bertaut, Marion, de la Guesle, Pibrac, d'Espeisses, Arnauld,

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the *Catholicon d'Espagne*, or as it is commonly called the *Satire Ménippée*, the *Mémoires* of Queen Marguerite, Coeffeteau, Du Perron, François de Sales, d'Urfé, de Molière (a now forgotten writer of forgotten romances), Malherbe, du Plessis-Mornay, Bardin, du Chastelet, Cardinal d'Ossat, de la Noue, de Refuge, Audiguier, and de Dampmartin.

Intelligent Frenchmen require to be told who some of these men were; we may therefore be forgiven if certain names look strange to us.


Among the poets the following were to be cited: Marot, Saint-Gelais, Ronsard, Du Bellay, Belleau, Du Bartas, Desportes, Bertaut, Du Perron, Garnier, Régnier, Malherbe, de Ligendes, Motin, Touvant, Monfuron,

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Théophile, Passerat, Rapin, and Sainte-Marthe.

Petit de Julleville expresses surprise that Rabelais, whose works are 'an inexhaustible mine of words, turns of expression, and images,' was omitted from the list of prose authorities. It would be interesting to know what motive led to such an omission.

The Academicians underestimated the amount of labor requisite for the making of a dictionary. This fact comes out, every now and then, in a way which was not intended to be amusing, and is the more so on that account. We can almost hear the sigh of relief with which they decided to give up this, that, and the other irritating and laborious feature of their task. They felt the lack of a direct-



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ing force, a marked personality, a chief who knew exactly what should be done, and who would compel them to do it. 'Give us a king to rule over us,' they said to Richelieu, 'or better still, give us duumvirs, who shall be Vaugelas and Faret, men well fitted for this work and able to perform it in worthy fashion.' To this request they added the suggestion that Vaugelas and Faret must be relieved from the burden of bread-winning if their whole time was to be sacrificed to the Dictionary.

The Cardinal made no answer to the proposition, in fact 'did not relish the idea,' though the request came to him through his favorite, Bois-Robert.

Matters rested for a time. Inter-



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est flagged to such a degree that it was difficult for the members to realize how great their former ardor had been. Pellisson declares that eight or ten months passed without mention of the Dictionary. Energy had exhausted itself in talk, and there was need of that stimulus which Richelieu alone knew how to give.

The Cardinal began to complain that they were doing nothing for the public weal. He threatened to abandon them — whatever that may mean — unless they reformed. They reiterated their previous statement, that there seemed to be no hope of substantial progress unless the work could be put in the hands of one man, who should devote his energy and all of his time to its advancement. The

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one man who by nature and self-training seemed best fitted for the undertaking was the Savoyard, Claude Favre, Sieur de Vaugelas, chamberlain to Gaston, Duc d'Orléans. He was an amiable and scholarly gentleman, whose love for the French language amounted to almost a passion. He was one of that type of scholars to whom work is a benediction. He loved words as much for their own sake as for the ideas they convey. He could become lyric over syntax and intoxicated upon etymologies. Such a man ought to make a dictionary.


He was not a recluse, for it was an essential part of his doctrine that a living language must be studied not alone from books but from the lips of



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those who speak it. 'Good usage' was a criterion to which Vaugelas made constant and reverential appeal. He recognized two authorities, 'Usage and Monsieur de Coeffeteau.' Sometimes he was compelled to decide between them, and did so with a care and exactness amusing to consider. He frequented the court and the salons during forty years, and had the wit never to talk grammar at inopportune times. He said that he aspired 'to grow old in the reading of good authors.' That were a pleasant life and a luxurious, withal.


Vaugelas was assiduous in his attendance upon the gatherings at Hôtel de Rambouillet. His veneration for the Marquise de Rambouillet was only one phase of a most extraordi-



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nary veneration for the entire race of womankind. This gentle bachelor had never learned a saying which is the oldest of sayings, though oftenest quoted in its modern form, ‘An angel but a woman too.’ He had a motto, by the faithful observance of which he contrived to get on in the sophisticated world; the motto was ‘Honor the ladies.’ Scholars were not above an assiduous gallantry in 1635; it was almost as efficacious in bringing them on in society as it was in advancing the cause of men of fashion.

Vaugelas had the usual distinction of scholars — he was poor. At one time he became tutor to the sons of Thomas-François de Savoy. When the Marquise de Rambouillet heard




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of his appointment she said : ‘ What a singular fortune that a man who talks so well should be put in charge of two boys, one of whom stammers, while the other is deaf and dumb.’

Vaugelas had an enormous influence upon literature though he wrote but little. He made a translation of Quintus Curtius, and in 1647 published an epoch-making book under the title *Remarks on the French Language*. Balzac said of the translation : ‘ The Alexander of Quintus Curtius is invincible, and that of Vaugelas is inimitable.’


He wrote so slowly that Voiture, who was his good and privileged friend, used to make fun of him. Voiture told Vaugelas that his books would never be done; for by the



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time one part was polished to the author's satisfaction, the language would have changed to such an extent that he would be obliged to do the other parts over again. In this respect, so Voiture declared, Vaugelas was like Martial's barber. The barber shaved his clients with more accuracy than dispatch. He would shave one side of a customer's face and begin upon the other. By the time he finished that the first side had grown again.


Richelieu having been brought to look at the matter of the Dictionary from the Academy's point of view, Vaugelas was reëstablished in the pension which he had lost through his alliance with Gaston, Duc d'Orléans.



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Vaugelas went to thank the Cardinal for the favor done him. Pellisson describes the incident. The Cardinal, seeing the scholar enter the room, advanced with benign and smiling majesty and said: 'Ah, Monsieur, you will at least not forget the word *Pension* in the Dictionary!' to which Vaugelas with a profound bow responded, 'No, Monseigneur, and still less the word *Remembrance*.'


It was difficult in the Seventeenth Century for a scholar to live without a pension, and must have been equally difficult to live with one. 'Alas! the unhappy pensions of that period! How precarious they were, and how subject to all kinds of reduction! The pay of the first quarter . . . often did service for the other three.' Thus



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comments the Abbé Fabre, apropos of the pension conferred upon Vaugelas; and then he quotes one of Chaplain's remarks in a letter to Balzac. 'The pension of Monsieur de Vaugelas is a pension, that is to say, nothing when it so pleases Monsieur de Bullion, and it so pleases him almost always.' Nevertheless men would work very cheerfully on promises of pay, and Vaugelas more cheerfully than most of men.


He drew up plans and submitted them to the Academy. They commenced on the letter A, and completed it in about eight and a half months. What pride of infallibility they may have entertained received an amusing shock; in the distribution of words among the different mem-



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bers, the word *Académie* was forgotten, and its absence not observed for some time.

Besides the ordinary sessions they held extraordinary ones, two 'bureaus,' or committees, meeting simultaneously, one at the house of the Chancellor and one at the house of Monsieur d'Ablancourt. Progress was but slow, however, and it was hard to keep up enthusiasm. The public freely ridiculed the snail-like pace with which the compilation advanced. That they should have made the letter **A** in less than a year was the earnest of motion if not of speed. But the speed slackened as the half decades and decades passed. 'The Academy works always at the Dictionary and progresses as com-

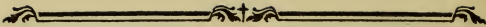


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panies do progress, that is to say, slowly,' wrote Chapelain to Bouchard.


Vaugelas died in January, 1650, and the work was greatly retarded. Embarrassed as he was by pensions, Vaugelas died in debt. Creditors seized his effects, including the papers relating to the Dictionary. Some legal process was necessary to secure their release and restoration to the Academy.

Mézeray succeeded Vaugelas, and pushed on the enterprise with vigor and knowledge. The task had grown complicated as the years slipped away. The various committees had acquired skill, and they had also increased in wisdom and were better able to see what ought to have been done in the earlier pages. In 1660



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Chapelain was again lamenting to one of his correspondents ‘the slow movement of ponderous machines.’ The end was in sight, however, and in 1672 the Dictionary was finished — finished, that is to say, as people declare that a house is ‘finished’ when the carpenters are out of it; the house is not ready for occupancy, neither was the Dictionary ready to be given to the public. The Academy spent twenty-two years more in correcting and polishing their work. The revision was thought to be as tedious as, and rather more painful than, the original compilation had been. The earlier letters were a little antiquated, as may be believed when a book has seen a third of a century in the making.



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It is a comfort to know that Chapelain lived to see his desire, though not to see his desire in print. He was seventy-seven years of age when the compilers reached the end of their task. He had been the chief originator, and had drawn up the plan. He had been indefatigable in doing his share, though we must remember that his share largely consisted in inspiring others to do theirs; when a man is writing an epic, he has but little spare time.

‘The Dictionary of the French Academy’¹ was published in 1694


¹ *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise dédié au Roy ; à Paris, chez la veuve de Jean-Baptiste Coignard, imprimeur ordinaire du Roy et de l'Académie françoise, rue Saint-Jacques, à la Bible d'Or ; et chez Jean-Baptiste Coignard, imprimeur*

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‘by the widow of Jean-Baptiste Coignard, printer in ordinary to the King and to the French Academy.’ The good widow’s printing-house was in Rue Saint-Jacques, ‘at the sign of the Golden Bible.’

We must understand what this Dictionary was and what it was not. For example it was not a catch-all, a verbal rag-bag, stuffed to overflowing with the odds and ends of language. It would not have been possible to recommend it to the public on the high ground that it ‘contained more words than any other dictionary now on the market.’ So far was it from


meur et libraire ordinaire du Roy et de l’Académie françoise, rue Saint-Jacques, près Saint-Séverin, au Livre d’Or. M. DC. LXXXIV. Avec privilège de Sa Majesté.



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being as big as possible that we may almost say it went to the other extreme and was as small as it could be made and still be adequate. It carried out the aristocratic idea for which Hôtel de Rambouillet stood, the idea which lay at the root of the Academy itself, an idea of selection, of choice. In other words it was not democratic; it set itself firmly against the notion that one word was as good as another.

There was an expression much used in the Seventeenth Century, 'honnête homme.' It meant that the man in question was a man of taste and culture, that he had tact and address, that he understood the bienséances. The honnête homme was not a pedant, not a literary enthusiast who interpreted life only through the medium




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of books, he was not a man of the world in the gross sense, but he was always a man who understood the world; he was the man of culture. The adjective was applied to women, it was applied to society. In so far as the Dictionary of the Academy was addressed to a particular audience, it was addressed to an audience which enjoyed the monopoly of that word *honnête*.

The Dictionary was, as I have said, conservative; the Academicians wished to protect the language. Vaugelas was accustomed to weigh words as one would weigh precious metals. A like spirit animated the society through all the years of its labor. When Furetière was expelled in 1685 for having appropriated some of the Academy's

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material for his own Dictionary, he assailed the company of which he had been twenty-three years a member in several lively and indignant pamphlets. In one of them he ridiculed the Academy's fussiness over little things. 'Monsieur Patru, who was one of the lights of the Academy, banished himself voluntarily long before his death because he was scandalized at the enormous length of time they disputed whether the letter *A* ought to be called simply a vowel, or whether it was a substantive masculine. . . . I have seen an entire meeting spent in disputing whether one should say *hors d'œuvre* or *hors œuvre*.' Furetière was irritated. The revelation of these family secrets could not injure the Academy, though it doubtless raised a



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laugh. To-day such facts help us to see how minute and painstaking the work was.


The Academicians, in compiling their Dictionary, aimed to protect the language; we have too many dictionaries at the present time constructed apparently with a view to injuring the language as much as possible. The comparison may not be entirely just, but it will serve. The Academy Dictionary was like a coupé, very elegant but with room for only two; some of our American dictionaries are like an omnibus, painted yellow, and filled with anybody and everybody.

Forty-one years ago the most genial of our humorists laughed at the American passion for big lexicons: 'We have so used up our epithets in the

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rhetoric of abuse that it takes two quarto dictionaries to supply the demand.' What would the humorist say of the present tendency? Too often these Falstaffian books are fattened by filling them with definitions of different kinds of pie, and superadding slang expressions and indigestible words of most recent coinage. The evil would be slight were it not that these books go into schools, and children are taught, or at least allowed to believe, that a word is fit for use because it is a 'dictionary word'! The reverence paid by the public to a dictionary is as comic as it is simple-hearted.


Without question, a dictionary which contains the word *dude* ought to be ashamed of itself. That word



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and hundreds of similar words have but one rightful place: they should be put into the dictionaries of Argot, of Slang, and kept there twenty years. Very few of them will come out alive, and they that do will have earned the right to live. No one supposes for a moment that it is possible to check the growth of language. If a given word becomes in course of time an inalienable part of the commonwealth of words, there is usually very little question of its fitness; but we may well protest against a premature naturalization of current slang. One of the crying needs of the day is a cure for adipose verbal tissue in our dictionaries.

IN reading the lives of the early Academicians one is continually amused and surprised in meeting familiar and modern touches. Human nature changes but little, and may be depended upon year after year and century after century to do the same things, and to do them as nearly as possible in the same manner. Men have like experiences, and, after all, are unaffected by electric lights and automobiles.




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Baudoin is a case in point. During his youth he traveled. Then he went to live in Paris, 'with the customary fortune of men of letters,' that is to say, without getting rich. He made translations for a living. He would translate anything, the classics, Italian poetry, modern Latin. He translated some of Bacon's works, and made a journey to England expressly for the purpose of translating Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. While here he met a young French lady who had lived some time in England. She helped him with his translations. Then he married her. That is the modern touch. To-day the biographical formula would read: 'He married his stenographer, a young lady of great ability and many personal charms.'



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L'Estoile is another striking figure, modern enough to have lived in the Nineteenth rather than the Seventeenth Century. We can almost see him as we read Pellisson's description, 'pale, lean, sickly, with scanty beard, black hair, and black eyes.' He had an extraordinary gift for falling in love; 'it was the cause of almost all his troubles.' He used to write his poetry by artificial light. If it happened to be day when he wanted to work, he would close the shutters and light the candles. When the poem was done, he would read it to a servant, for he maintained that a successful poetical work has something in it which appeals to the grossest nature. Both these anecdotes have the modern quality. Honoré de Balzac is



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said to have preferred working by artificial light irrespective of the time of day; and a distinguished American scholar used to declare that he read his Shakespearian criticisms to his laundress, the inference being that if she could understand them there was a chance that the public might.

L'Estoile worked so slowly and carefully that he produced in a lifetime but two plays and a little handful of poems. He was a severe critic, and brutal besides. A young man from the country submitted a comedy to L'Estoile; he thought he had written a masterpiece. L'Estoile showed him that it contained a thousand faults. The youth is said to have died of humiliation. There the modern touch is wanting: the young man should



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have written another play, or else have become a dramatic critic.

Of all the members of the Academy, no one better typifies certain characteristics of the age in which he lived than Paul Pellisson. It was an age when fortunes were made in a day. It was an age when men could rise too quickly from an obscure beginning to the highest official position, and almost immediately go from the highest official position to the Bastille, and not wholly deserve either reward. It was an age of sinecures and pensions; an age in which men were often promised, and sometimes paid, absurdly large sums for the doing of quite unimportant things. The whole fabric of life was mixed and strange; thread of gold woven into the com-




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monest of fustian. Life was compounded of extremes, surprises, theatrical dénoûments. This is why the Seventeenth Century is so picturesque.

Pellisson wrote the history of the Academy. The book is now two hundred and fifty years old, and is more modern in tone than many books written this year. The members were so gratified with the performance that they honored Pellisson as no man had been honored before, and as no man is likely to be honored again; they made him a supernumerary Academician, admitted him to their meetings, and promised him the first place that should become vacant.

People sometimes talk about the 'forty-first fauteuil,' meaning the chair which ought to have been created for



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the great writer of each generation, who somehow always manages to be left out, a Descartes, a Pascal, a La Rochefoucauld, a Molière, in the Eighteenth Century a Rousseau, and in our time an Honoré de Balzac. Pellisson, however, is the only man who can be said to have occupied a literal 'forty-first fauteuil.'

Pellisson studied law, and published a 'paraphrase' on the *Institutes* of Justinian at so youthful an age that people could hardly believe he was the author of it. He came to Paris with letters of introduction to Conrart, a brother Protestant. He made the acquaintance of Mademoiselle de Scudéry, and was in time regarded as the shining light of her salon. The friendship between this pair was one

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of the most grotesque and pathetic of romances. Madelaine de Scudéry was never beautiful; Pellisson was horribly disfigured by the smallpox. After that frightful illness his most intimate friends did not know him. He was so ugly that his ugliness was proverbial. The brutally minded made epigrams upon him, calling him Adonis, and asking whether he were not 'un joli garçon.' But he had a generous nature, incomparable manners, and a bright mind. It was Madame de Sévigné who said that Pellisson abused the privilege men enjoy of being homely. And it was the Abbé d'Olivet who added that with all his homeliness, in order to please, Pellisson had only to speak.


He became chief clerk to Fouquet,



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the Surintendant, and 'divided his time between finance and poetry.' He made treaties with the farmers of imposts and wrote Fouquet's love-letters. It was the custom of the time for a great man to keep a poet. The language of polite society and love had grown polished and elaborate to such a degree that a special training was required to master it in the first place, and constant practice to retain one's mastery afterward.


When Fouquet fell from power, Pellisson never lost faith in him and manfully shared his chief's disgrace. He was incarcerated in the Bastille during four years. A German of gross and stupid manners was employed to pass himself as a fellow prisoner and entangle Pellisson in damaging talk



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about Fouquet. Pellisson said nothing, and probably knew nothing, to the discredit of his patron. He so won over the German by his charm of manner that the fellow became his emissary to Mademoiselle de Scudéry. The lovers exchanged letters daily. The power of love is never fully comprehended unless we take note of the fact that it has been able to transform the literary style of an elderly précieuse from the affected and pretentious into the natural and charming. Nothing can be imagined more sincere and human than some of Mademoiselle de Scudéry's letters to Pellisson.

Pellisson not only wrote love-letters, but also a spirited defense of the unhappy Fouquet. For a long time no one knew the authorship. It was




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traced to him finally, and he was rigidly denied pen, ink, and paper from that time on. To save himself from insanity he was reduced to those pathetic expedients of which we read in old prison lore.

The heroic passages in this man's life ended when he was released from the Bastille. He was converted, became historiographer-royal, and wrote books in praise of Louis XIV. Speaking of Pellisson's eulogy of the monarch who had robbed him of his liberty, Voltaire says: 'That is a thing one sees only in monarchies.' Pellisson may have felt that he had earned a little repose.


Notable among the early Academicians was Patru the lawyer. As we have already seen, his eloquent ad-



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dress on being admitted to the Academy brought about the establishment of a custom whereby every new member pronounces a formal discourse giving thanks for the honor done him.


Patru was one of those men who get a reputation for literary powers without writing. Such men have a gift for the spoken and not for the written word. They are uneasy if they find themselves compelled to use the pen rather than the voice as the medium for bringing their ideas to the public. Patru threatened all his life to compose a rhetoric. His friends believed that it would be the best rhetoric in the whole world; and men who fancy that eloquence is something that can be acquired awaited eagerly the publication of Patru's



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book, imagining that by reading it they would grow like its author. Patru died without achieving the task to which he set himself. Yet his fame is the greater because of the volume which he did not write. He protected his reputation as a man of letters by not printing a book. For it is easy to see that had he published that much heralded rhetoric, it must have fallen below public expectation. No mere book could have explained a gift of eloquence such as this orator was possessed of. People might have said that Patru on paper was not as impressive and convincing as Patru on the platform.


As long as he lived this man was known as the French Quintilian. When he appeared at the courts of



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justice, the lawyers flocked about him to ask questions. These questions were not upon points of law; they concerned the difficulties and delicacies of the French language. We are not to suppose that Patru's brother lawyers undervalued his professional abilities; they respected him as a lawyer and adored him as a rhetorician.


His powers must have been very great, and his judgment on literary matters as a whole very sound, for he had the respect and admiration of all the distinguished men of letters of his day. Addison, by a well-meant but unlucky piece of advice, incurred the lasting hatred of Pope. Patru fared better at the hands of those who came to him for that advice which he always gave freely and according to his



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light. La Fontaine venerated him, though Patru had tried to dissuade La Fontaine from writing his *Fables*. Boileau esteemed him in the highest degree, and yet Patru had advised against the composition of the *Art of Poetry*, the work upon which Boileau's reputation largely rests. Vaugelas consulted Patru as he might have consulted an oracle, and yet Vaugelas was himself the author of the *Remarks on the French Language*. Thirty years after the great days of his fame, Patru was still spoken of as 'the man of this kingdom of France who best knows the French language.'

It is pleasant to think about Patru because he restores one's confidence in the value of the spoken word. Oratory is a dangerous art; and too



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often is it possible to classify orators under the head of 'suspicious characters.' However, 'with skill and training, even a sincere man can manage to speak tolerably well without telling too many lies,' as an English historian once observed in a characterization of the virtue and vices of oratory. Patru was the sincere man who was also a great orator. He was one of a type of men whose powers can only be appreciated when we stand in their presence, men of the great personality, the grand manner, the impressive pose. Everything about Patru was pleasing, his figure, his voice, his carriage. He charmed his contemporaries 'by his constant urbanity, by his good nature at once grave and playful,' and he charmed



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them above all by the perfection of his taste and the evenness of his friendship. A volume of his speeches was published in 1670. As so often happens when an attempt is made to reduce oratory to printing, these discourses fall short of explaining Patru's contemporary fame.

I may close this note on the eminent Academician with an anecdote. Patru was noted for his independence. After Conrart's death a great lord applied for his vacant chair. There was less objection to the candidate because he was a lord than because he lacked culture. The Academy was likely to be embarrassed in either case, whether it admitted or rejected the applicant. Patru settled the matter for the time being by relating a story. 'Gentle-



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men,' he said, 'there was an ancient Greek, a musician, who had an admirable lyre. He broke one of the strings. Instead of replacing it with catgut, he had the vanity to put in a silver cord. After that the lyre was always out of tune.'

Dictionaries are said to be entertaining reading. So too are 'blue' books, club directories, and the like. There is also much entertainment to be had in reading the list of incumbents of the forty fauteuils during the Seventeenth Century and observing the juxtaposition of names. Vaugelas the Unassuming was succeeded by that braggart playwright Georges de Scudéry; and he in turn by Courcillon, Marquis de Dangeau, whose services to literature were slight, but

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the list of whose titles can hardly be compressed into seven lines of print.

In 1698 Fénelon occupied the chair which Serizay had occupied in 1635; Jean Racine took the place of Méziriac; Silhon was followed by Colbert, and he in turn by an actual man of letters, Jean de La Fontaine. Among the successors of Balzac were Harlay, Archbishop of Paris, who refused Molière Christian burial, and Dacier, *Garde des Livres du Cabinet du Roi*, husband of Madame Dacier, of prodigious learning and disputatious memory. Colomby's place had three other occupants before it fell to the lot of the frivolous Abbé de Choisy.

Voiture, the king of précieux and précieuses, he who had to be frightened



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into attending the Academy meetings by threats of discipline, was succeeded by a grave historian, Mézeray; and toward the close of the century, the incumbent was a man who could call himself Bishop, Count, and Peer of France. Godeau, who figured at Hôtel de Rambouillet as 'Julie's dwarf,' then became Bishop of Grasse, and wrote forty-four works, mostly religious, was followed by the orator Fléchier, himself a guest of the 'blue room' during the latter days of the great salon. The fauteuil of Racan had, in 1693, a more than worthy incumbent in La Bruyère.

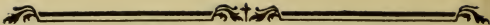
Pierre and Thomas Corneille had in turn the place first held by Maynard, the friend and disciple of Malherbe; and Hay du Chastelet, Abbé



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de Chambon, was succeeded by the great Bossuet. Huet, Archbishop of Avranches, became an Academician in 1674, and enjoyed an incumbency of forty-seven years. He and his predecessor, Gomberville, might with a little effort have divided a century between them.


The charitably minded should rejoice that Fate in a sarcastic mood did not hand over the *fauteuil* long occupied by Jean Chapelain to a certain poet who entered the Academy July 1, 1685. All Chapelain's enemies put together had not done so much to embitter his days as had this one man. There was a malignancy in Boileau's attacks upon Chapelain which is not explained by remarking upon the satirist's zeal for the sound



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and noble in literature as against the meretricious, fashionable, and stupid. Boileau's courage and independence have been justly extolled; but we must not forget that he was of that harsh race of satirists who love to give pain. It was a pleasure to this man to torture his victim; the consciousness of being right gave zest to his enjoyment.

Boileau's presence among the Immortals illustrates the old doctrine that the radicals of one generation are the conservatives of the next. Boileau had lived his free and militant literary life, a life of the street, the cabaret, and the salon, if salon it may be called, of Ninon de l'Enclos, and now at the age of fifty was Academician, and as much at home as if the institution had




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always and in every particular stood for what he valued most. This in epitome is the history of the Académie française.

The distinguished critic who so recently became a member of this august body has well expressed the relation which the Academy holds to men of letters. ‘Attacked by the new literary generation which is not as yet a part of it, little by little it receives that generation into its bosom to be assailed in turn by the next; always the object of attack and of passionate desire, the Academy is the most vigorous always, and always the most conspicuous of our literary reunions.’


VI


DURING the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries the history of the Academy is the literary history of France. A few distinguished men of letters have failed to receive the honor which was their due; but on the whole it is surprising how little injustice has been done. Where there has been apparent injustice, it can be explained if not defended. Now and then the fault was in the candidate; not every man of letters is a gentle-



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man as well as a man of letters. Now and then the fault was in the Academy; in which case Lowell's general remark suffices. Lowell says: 'Assemblies might be mentioned, composed entirely of Masters of Arts and Doctors in Divinity, which have sometimes shown traces of human passion and prejudice in their votes.'

If in the Seventeenth Century the Abbé Cotin and the Abbé de Choisy became members, so likewise did Corneille, Racine, Fénelon, Bossuet, La Fontaine, and Boileau. If in the Eighteenth Century one finds Academicians unknown to fame and scarce related to literature, one also finds Voltaire, Massillon, D'Alembert, Marmontel, La Harpe, Marivaux, Crébillon, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Montes-




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quieu, Buffon, Condillac, and Condorcet.

Coming to the Nineteenth Century, we may not lightly criticise the company which has had the honor of counting among its members poets such as Alfred de Vigny, Alfred de Musset, Lamartine, Victor Hugo; historians such as Martin, Thiers, Mignet, Duruy, and Guizot; critics like Sainte-Beuve, Taine, Villemain, Nisard, and Saint Marc-Girardin; scholars like Renan; not to speak of Nodier the universally gifted, Cousin the master of the superlative, and Mérimée, that fastidious man of letters who sought perfection in literary form and knew the art of writing little and saying much.

The future of the Academy is in a



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way problematical. Its continuity is assured; we may trust the conservatism of the French people for that. The Academy lived through the French Revolution; no severer test could be put upon it. But what its future work is to be is a source of fruitful discussion. Perhaps it may continue the great *Histoire littéraire de la France*, and it will no doubt always work upon the Dictionary. A critic, reproaching the Academy for the thousandth time, because it was not composed of men who were at once philologists and men of letters, said, 'Men of letters are not savants.' No, but let us hope that there will never come a time when the public has not access to a dictionary with which men of letters have had some-



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thing to do. No higher tribute could be paid than was paid by Dr. James Murray to Dr. Samuel Johnson the other day. But Johnson was not a savant.

The Académie française is a society to which the word *unique* may be applied. What Pellisson wrote in 1652 is even truer to-day, that whether one consider its object, or its founder, or the distinguished men of which it has been composed, it is a company whose history is worthy of being understood, and whose memoirs are worthy of being scrupulously preserved.



BIBLIOGRAPHICAL
NOTE

THE first volume in this series, *Hôtel de Rambouillet and the Précieuses*, contains a list of twenty-five books relating directly or indirectly to the history of polite society in France. The following bibliographical note, like the other, is only for the guidance of such readers as find after turning the pages of this essay that they have a curiosity to read the annals of the Académie française in the writings of men who on this subject speak always with authority.



BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

I am disposed to lay some emphasis on the value of the short histories even for advanced students. After much study one often finds that the bold outlines of the theme are obscured in a haze of subsidiary matter. This mist can usually be cleared away by re-reading the paragraphs touching upon a given subject in any one of the manuals similar to Petit de Julleville's *Leçons de la Littérature française*. The French have the incomparable gift of being simple without being childish; and they are perfectly willing to give information. Nothing, for example, can be more lucid than the account of Vaugelas in the book just mentioned.

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2. Mesnard (Paul), *Histoire de l'Académie française*. Paris, Charpentier, 1857.

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7. Rouxel (A.), *Chronique des Elections à l'Académie française.* Paris, Didot, 1886.

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THIRD : Direct sources.

1. Pellisson et d'Olivet, *Histoire de l'Académie française.* Pellisson's narrative begins with the 'Golden Age' and comes down to the year 1652. The Abbé d'Olivet then takes up the story and carries it on to the close of the Seventeenth Century. There are numerous issues of this

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classic work. The book-lover will enjoy the narrative none the less if it shall be his fortune to read it in the quarto edition made at Paris, 'Chez JEAN-BAPTISTE COIGNARD Fils, Imprimeur du Roi, & de l'Académie Française, rue S. Jacques. M. DCC. XXIX.'

For students the indispensable edition is that published in two volumes by Didier et C^{ie}, Paris, 1858, 'avec une introduction, des éclaircissements et notes par Ch-L. Livet.' Among the 'pièces justificatives' at the end of the first volume will be found, besides extracts from Chapelain's correspondence, the *Comédie des Académistes* by Saint-Evremond, and the *Requête des Dictionnaires* by Ménage.

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